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U.S. CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE GETTING NEW LEADER, NEW CHALLENGES

By Jim Wolf

WASHINGTON, May 10, Reuter - Some questions suited for U.S. Central Intelligence Agency analysts: Why is Director William Webster resigning just now? And what's next for their cloaks and daggers in the post-Cold War world?

With his retirement as the nation's top spymaster, Webster leaves the CIA at a crossroads, no longer viewing all events through the prism of the old East-West divide.

"We're pointed in the direction of the 1990s, substantially different than the directions of the 1980s," Webster said in a television interview on Thursday. "It's a good time, I think, for someone with some new ideas to come on board and a good time to leave feeling good about it."

President George Bush announced on Wednesday that Webster, 67, was stepping down after four years. The White House said on Thursday that Bush may take a week to nominate a successor.

"A strong nation requires a strong intelligence organization," said Bush, himself CIA chief from January 1976 to January 1977. The president praised Webster for carrying out the "single mission" he had ordered: providing intelligence without trying to shape policy.

Bush's own comments highlighted questions about whether Webster, never a member of Bush's inner circle, was being pushed or was jumping. "He has done a superb job," the president said. "I hate to see him go."

Webster seemed to acknowledge that something or somebody had been nudging him out, but declined to spell it out.

"I think it's inevitable that someone in this position is going to have some ducks nibbling," he said in a television interview. "I tried to overlook that. You never like it, but you have it."

Whoever succeeds Webster will have to chart a new course in a world no longer driven by the Cold War. The next CIA chief must also cope with a Congress apparently bent on a sweeping overhaul of the 30 billion dollars-a-year intelligence community budget.

The House of Representatives and Senate Intelligence Committees are studying legislation that would streamline the spy agencies and boost their accountability to Congress.

Some congressional critics have called for doing away with the CIA altogether and shifting intelligence-gathering to an arm of the State Department.

The collapse of the Soviet military threat and demise of the Warsaw Pact in the past two years deprived the U.S. intelligence community of the nemesis that drove it since the CIA was established in 1947.

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Increasingly, the CIA and its brethren agencies are focusing on foiling espionage by foreign companies or governments seeking to steal American trade secrets or pierce U.S. economic strategies.

The intelligence community is also being called on to play a greater role in thwarting drug producers and traffickers. And Webster set up a federal counter-terrorism centre to coordinate U.S. and foreign intelligence on global terrorism.

"In the past the world has been simpler than it will be in the immediate future," said David Whipple, a 35-year veteran of the CIA operations directorate who is executive director of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers.

Now that the Soviet Union is no longer an active ideological opponent, the United States must look at Third World problems independently of each other.

"That means in effect that all over the world you're going to have problems that are going to need close scrutiny if our national interests are to be protected," Whipple said.

Experts in intelligence generally regarded Webster as a transitional figure, ideally suited to steer the CIA through the bumpy aftermath of the Iran-Contra fiasco.

"It's important for us now to have a professional intelligence officer who will take the agency into the new era," Ray Cline, a deputy CIA director for intelligence from 1962 to 1966, said in an interview.

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